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KING EDWARD VII.

BY ANGLO-AMERICAN.

SOME years ago I contributed to the pages of this REVIEW an article, entitled "An Indictment of the British Monarchy," which gave, I fear, a certain amount of not unnatural offence in England. In it, while doing what I considered to be ample justice to the popularity and the political convenience of the Monarchy, I endeavored to show that in certain ways it "militates against national efficiency, emphasizes and encourages what is least desirable in the national character, and perpetuates an atmosphere which is fatal to the realization of the country's best self." I affirmed, among other things, that the British Monarchy, as we have known it since Queen Victoria's accession, is not an intellectual or stimulating force; that it does next to nothing for education and still less for art and letters; that it has lost the idea of leadership and initiative; that its example helps to confirm that caste system, the caste spirit and the caste point of view in the more than liberal place they already hold in the structure of English society; that the qualities of "tact," "amiability" and "graciousness," which are pretty nearly all that are expected of an English sovereign, bear their inevitable fruit in an excessive worship of externals and appearances and in an over-

valuation of the purely decorative, non-productive elements of life; that the whole system of honors and precedence, of which the Monarchy is universally held to be the source, works with a subtle and degrading perniciousness and creates and popularizes false and therefore demoralizing values; and that the public life of the country, its standards of administration and its social atmosphere have suffered in earnestness, vigor and efficiency by being presided over by a Monarch who is necessarily rather a passive and spectacular figurehead than an active agent of progress and reform. These conclusions were at the time powerfully attacked in the issue of this REVIEW for December, 1903, by an Englishman signing himself "Defensor"; but I see, on the whole, little reason to revise or moderate the general trend of my criticisms. I am, however, willing to admit that in the seven years that have elapsed since the article was written the late King's activities and achievements have brought into clearer light the beneficent influence which the Crown may still exert in British affairs and that a dispassionate summary to-day of the case for and against the Monarchy would result in a verdict considerably more favorable than one felt able to enter in 1903.

I am conscious, as I write this, of a sensation of surprise. Few dreamed, when Queen Victoria died, that her son would confer fresh renown on the Throne she had raised to an unexampled height of honor, confidence and affection, or that he would extend its utility to spheres she had scarcely entered. The English press took upon itself to remind him on his accession that what is pardonable in a Prince of Wales cannot be condoned in a King; and the general disposition of the people was to believe that with all his popularity, his heartiness, his approachableness and his instinct for saying the right thing at the right moment, he would yet be unable to bridge over the gap left by the old Queen's death. It is almost with a shock of astonishment that the country to-day, surveying his nine years' reign, realizes that a more powerful and successful Monarch has rarely sat on the British throne. Where a decade ago people thought of him predominantly as a man of pleasure, fond of the material things of life, *un bon Parisien* before everything, they now recognize that he has proved himself a statesman and a diplomatist of the highest aptitudes. Almost the last stage on which it was expected that he would essay to cut a considerable figure was that

of *Welt-Politik*; yet with the possible exception of the Kaiser, nobody in Europe had more influence on the course of international politics during the past decade. King Edward, indeed, had not been on the throne a couple of years before the country found itself confronted and ruled over by a new man, a man it had previously had little chance of knowing. There were always, of course, two views of the King as of every monarch. There was the private view, the view you would hear expressed in the after-dinner confidences of politicians, diplomatists, society people, naval and military men, and so on; and there was the public view, the general opinion which the masses of the people, working from the outside and in a confusion of half lights, came somehow to form. There is always a gap between these two views, but nowhere is the gap so pronounced as in England. Nowhere else is the difference in the way men speak of the Sovereign in private and the way they speak of him in public so marked. The atmosphere of a Monarchy naturally does not permit of much outspokenness. The few who know and could speak from personal experience pay tribute to *les convenances* by monastically holding their peace, in public at any rate. The many who do not know and can only guess arrive at a few general impressions which are more interesting than valuable. In spite of an overwhelming democracy and the "society" papers, the English Monarchy is still a close concern; and those who have intimate access to it are but a fraction of the people. This, to be sure, is only as it should be. Given a Monarchy, seclusion must be one of its attributes. It dare not make itself chief or take part in any such hand-shaking festivities as come naturally to an American President. At all costs the appearance of dignity and ceremonial aloofness must be preserved. A thousand influences, not all of them perhaps of the most praiseworthy kind, combine in England to keep it up and to make the opinions of the man in the street on the personality of his Sovereign very different from the opinions of those who are really inside the Court circles.

One of the warmest tributes to King Edward as a monarch that I can recall came from a Cabinet Minister who has long ranked among the three or four most powerful statesmen in the kingdom. He had been thrown for fifteen years into close relationship, both private and official, with the King both as Prince of Wales and as Sovereign; and he had never really liked him. That

only made all the more remarkable his opinion deliberately expressed to me some five years ago that "from the day of his accession the King has done perfectly." He went on to say that the King's shrewdness and tact and industry and extraordinary quickness in grasping the point of an argument or a situation had astonished his Ministers. He especially praised the King's "manageableness." His Majesty, he said, had proved far more docile, more willing to surrender his private wishes, less crotchety than was Queen Victoria. "He had not made a single mistake"; it was "a pleasure to work with him"; above all, he was "a man you could convince"; he gave way with imperturbable good-humor when he was satisfied that reasons of State required the surrender of private schemes and inclinations. One such occasion presented itself at the time of the Coronation. There were two gentlemen who confidently expected to snatch peerages from the shower of Coronation honors; they were both warm personal friends of the King, who, for reasons on which the gossip of the day had a good deal to say, was most anxious to gratify their ambitions. On all such matters the late Lord Salisbury was usually the most complacent of Prime Ministers. He looked on with cynical detachment. "Oh, don't bother me about the matter," he was once reported to have said when his private secretary came to consult him about the annual batch of honors. "Don't bother me. Settle it your own way. Make anybody anything you like." But on this occasion even Lord Salisbury was spurred to protest. The elevation of the two would-be peers was not acceptable to the six hundred-odd members of the House of Lords, and the Prime Minister put his foot down very firmly on the proposal. The result was that, after a certain amount of feeling had been aroused, the King gave way. Only his instinctive reasonableness, a quality that never deserted him, could have made it possible.

To the masses of the English people King Edward was first and foremost a "good fellow." Only a few weeks ago an Irish Nationalist described him in the House of Commons as "the most popular man in the kingdom." The description was perfectly just. I mentioned it while waiting for a train to a ticket collector at a small country railroad station. He was a good royalist. "The most popular man in the kingdom!" he said. "Why, he's the most popular man in the world—bar none." "Bar none," he repeated, with relish and conviction. That was,

literally, how the enormous masses of his countrymen thought of King Edward. They liked his unfailing bonhomie and his air of being at home and enjoying himself wherever he went; they liked his all-round sportsmanship; they liked the admirable way in which he combined pageantry and stateliness with the workings of the democratic system; they liked to think of him "having a good time," attending the theatre, race-course and polo-ground without fuss or unnecessary display or any of the military accompaniments that on the Continent convert the simplest incident into a State event; they liked also to think that when ceremony was necessary, no one could be more ceremonial. On all these grounds their opinion of him was thoroughly well justified. He gratified them by being visible and public without cheapening the Crown, by resurrecting the Court in a brilliancy it had not known for half a century, by his skill in raising London to the social supremacy of Europe, by the many and varied points at which he came in touch with the sporting interests of the people and by the atmosphere of heartiness and good-fellowship he diffused. I can recall only one instance in which he seemed to fall a little short of what was expected of him. There was a general feeling that when Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman died and the country was left without a Government the King might well have interrupted his holiday in the south of France and returned to his capital. With that exception his instinct for divining the unspoken wishes and anticipations of the country and for acting on them never once went astray.

Walter Bagehot used to say that an English Sovereign had three constitutional rights—the right to be consulted, the right to encourage and the right to warn. He added, shrewdly enough, that a ruler of great sense and sagacity would need no others. King Edward, who was pre-eminently a ruler of sense and sagacity, proved throughout his reign that Bagehot did not exaggerate. And, indeed, when you come to think of it, a monarch who is entitled to full knowledge and full discussion of all public transactions; who may criticise and so alter or modify his Cabinet's decisions; who may suggest amendments, raise doubts, propose alternatives and thus help to clarify the Ministerial mind; who is permanent while his advisers are fugitive, an onlooker while they are combatants; able to take a broad and leisurely survey while they are blinded by a thousand bewildering details—is

clearly a monarch with the amplest opportunities for influencing national policy. King Edward turned all these openings to admirable account. At one time, indeed, the strict Constitutionalists muttered a good deal among themselves over the extent and pertinacity of the King's activities. How far those activities really stretched we may have to wait another fifty years to learn, but it will be somewhat of a surprise if it is not then revealed that the late King took a strong line on two of the most important developments of his reign—first, the settlement of the Irish Land Tenure question and the general approach to a reconciliation between England and Ireland; and, secondly, the reorganization of the War Office and the creation of the Territorial Army. It was, however, in the sphere of foreign affairs that the King made his influence most immediately felt and earned the honorable title of "Edward the Peacemaker." In that field he not only availed himself of the normal privileges of a British Sovereign, but created new ones. He constituted himself in the name of his people and with their enthusiastic applause a sort of travelling Ambassador on behalf of international amity. He assumed the task of approaching the peoples and rulers and statesmen of Europe and of negotiating with them as a quasi unofficial but wholly representative spokesman of the nation. He thus made himself the most commanding figure in European politics and played a part, often the leading part, in a diplomatic revolution as complete and far-reaching as any in history. I need do no more than recall how enormously his visits and his engaging personality and good sense helped to knit England and France together, dissipated the seemingly incurable suspiciousness that hung over Anglo-Russian relations, and cemented anew the friendships between England and Spain, Italy and Portugal. These were very great and very real achievements, and I doubt whether they would have been possible but for King Edward and the peculiar qualities of his mind and temperament. He was an excellent judge of men and affairs with a natural inherited shrewdness sharpened by immense experience and a wide contact with life. He learned and assimilated with extraordinary quickness; a man of strong feelings, sharp decisions and not without a native strain of irascibility he had himself always well in hand; few prejudices clouded his judgment—he could tolerate anything but dulness and flaccidity; his fondness for society and agreeable

surroundings and company made him genuinely anxious to stave off friction, to bring men and nations together and to put them at their ease; everything he did and said showed forethought, maturity and an absence of effort; he enjoyed his diplomatic activities not only for the advantages that accrued from them to his nation and the prestige they brought to himself, but also because the instinct for matching his gifts and brains against those of other rulers ran strongly in his blood.

It will probably puzzle the historian of the future to explain why it was that a Sovereign so successful in diplomacy abroad, so popular among the masses of his own people, should yet have failed to avert the severe Constitutional crisis which filled the closing months of his reign. The anonymous author of an article in the May number of the "Contemporary Review"—an article that was suppressed by the proprietors of that periodical within a day or two of its publication—went some distance towards solving the mystery.

"No dispassionate observer," he declared, "will deny that in failing to avert this collision—*i. e.*, the collision between the Lords and the Commons over the Budget—the King, whether through misfortune or by fault, disappointed the expectations of the nation. . . . The confidence in the Crown, as the honest broker between parties, received a rude shock when it was evident that the King was unable to prevent the rejection of the Budget. It was openly said that if the late Queen had still been on the throne the catastrophe would not have overtaken us. . . . It is possible that the King, like his advisers, lacked the high quality of imagination necessary to enable him to grasp all that was implied in the beginning of a reactionary revolution. . . . That the King did perceive the danger in a dim sort of way is admitted, and he used what influence he had in his own fashion to induce the leaders of the Opposition to desist ere it was too late from challenging so serious a combat. But at this point we lay our finger upon the most serious element of weakness in the whole case. The King has many great qualities. No one is more tactful; no one is more kind-hearted. He is a capital sportsman, and in foreign affairs he possesses a fine instinct which seldom leads him wrong. His very geniality and good-fellowship deprive him of much of the awe with which the late Queen was regarded. The divinity that doth hedge a King wears somewhat thin in the atmosphere of dinner-parties and race-courses. His Majesty is a man of the world, going freely into society. But not even the most servile courtier would say that he has ever, whether as Prince or King, surrounded himself with men who are influential in either House of Parliament. Those who have shared his valuable counsels may be the wisest of men, as they are often among the pleasantest; but to the great political world they

are unknown. With the doubtful exception of Lord Esher, who has one of the sanest heads in Europe, none of those who constitute the *entourage* of the King count for anything in politics. Of the chiefs of our old nobility it is comparatively rare to find any among those whom His Majesty delights to honor. Nor is it libellous to assert that his Ministers, whether Liberal or Tory, have never found in him that garnered store of rich experience reaped by a lifetime of unremitting industry which made the late Queen the adviser of all her counsellors, the vigilant critic of her Ministers, the most influential of all the servants of the realm. The King, in short, has neither the strong character, the firm, resolute determination, nor the keen interest in political men and political measures which would have added to the influence always appertaining to the throne the immense, undefinable weight of a commanding personality."

There is a considerable amount of truth and justice in that criticism. The late King's social preferences were not of a kind that the English aristocracy relished, and the state of quiescent estrangement that existed between the Crown and the old nobility on this account undoubtedly impaired the King's influence in the crisis of last year and made it impossible for him to appeal to the Lords with anything like the effectiveness Queen Victoria commanded. In this respect King George V is more happily situated. He has no "set"; he is believed to have had little sympathy or liking for some of his father's most intimate friends. Moreover, his instincts naturally gravitate towards Toryism, and in the most difficult and perplexing situation in which he finds himself he may perhaps be able to count, to an extent denied to King Edward, upon the co-operation of all classes and parties in working out a solution. To the country at large his true character is little known. In none of his actions has he given any opening for criticism; in none, too, has he inspired any great enthusiasm. He is more interested in politics than was his father; he holds stronger views and he expresses them less cautiously; he lacks the coolness, the tact, the invariable discretion that characterized King Edward; and in foreign affairs he is necessarily without any authority except such as goes inevitably with his great office. It is never easy to judge what a man will be as a King from what he has been as a Prince. But King George V will pleasantly disappoint the general expectations of his subjects if he proves as competent, popular and many-sided a Sovereign as King Edward VII.

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